

Reintroducing Fire At The Urban Wildland Interface: Two Examples

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This paper presents some practical aspects involved with reintroducing fire to coniferous forests of the southern United States. The application of fire continues to increase in complexity due to urban sprawl, air quality issues, and regulatory constraints. Many sites suffer from unnaturally high live and dead fuel accumulations due to decades of fire exclusion. Additionally, the loss of habitat to urbanization increases the importance of restoring and maintaining those acres still in native condition. The case study we describe is dominated by an overstory of *Pinus palustris* and an understory comprised mainly of palmetto/gallberry, one of the most flammable fuel types in the US. This ecosystem evolved under, and was historically maintained by frequent low-intensity fires. Our example is in an area that has suffered from extended fire-free periods and contains several subdivisions characterized by tightly packed homes that were developed with no consideration of the potential for wildland fire, many owned by retirees with respiratory problems. Other nearby smoke sensitive areas, include schools and heavily traveled highways. Such worst-case scenarios exponentially increase the challenges/risks facing fire managers. Because of its complexity, this case study demonstrates many of the societal issues and technical challenges facing fire managers when planning and conducting restoration burns.

We focus on the substantial outreach and planning effort necessary to convince the interested public that, although fire is not the only option to efficiently reduce hazardous fuel accumulations along the urban wildland interface, it is the only choice that will also restore function to these deteriorating natural communities. A significant part of the pre-burn effort involved reassurance to nervous homeowners that the area could be safely burned. In fact this case study reinforces the notion that, when burning in the urban interface, executing the burn often requires less effort than the planning, cooperation, and coordination necessary prior to ignition. Although this example is from the southern United States, fire managers everywhere face similar challenges and can benefit from the information presented herein regarding the underlying problems and approaches necessary to convince a dubious public that fire can be safely and effectively reintroduced into fire-starved ecosystems.



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